Interview with Horace G. Dawson Jr.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR HORACE G. DAWSON, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Ambassador Dawson]

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you could give me, as we get into this, something of your background. Where'd you come from?

DAWSON: Well, I was born in Georgia. I'm from Augusta, Georgia, actually. And I did all my early schooling there, though high school. I attended public schools, through elementary, and went to a private high school called Haines Institute for four years, following which I went to college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. I am one of five; two of us did not survive infancy. I have two brothers and two sisters.

Q: When did you get your interest in foreign affairs?

DAWSON: Well, I think I had an interest almost from the beginning, through reading, but not a very active interest until I went to Iowa to do graduate studies in 1958. I had been a teacher of English in Louisiana, and then also in North Carolina, and decided to go off and get a doctorate degree in mass communications, because I had been connected also throughout this time with newspapers and especially college publications. I had become something of a specialist in college publications, and so I decided to go off and get a

doctorate in mass communications. The State University of Iowa had a very young and very active program at the time. It's been emulated variously since. And I was one of their earlier students, I suspect.

In any case, I went out there, and, because of my multicultural interest, I chose as a topic the role of the media in helping to form the attitudes of foreign students prior to their coming to the United States. I tried to determine if the media had any influence on them in their choice, and, furthermore, what were their attitudes about the United States once they had been exposed to this country which so much interested them prior to their coming. So it was an attitude study, with comparative situation.

And this caught the attention of a number of people in Washington, back in the early '60s when it was released, and it came to the attention of Edward R. Murrow.

Q: Who was then the director of USIA.

DAWSON: Yes, he'd been appointed by Kennedy. I think he was probably Kennedy's first appointment, certainly the first major appointment. And so this, early on, came to his attention, and some of his people invited me to think in terms of USIA. As I said, I was teaching then; I had no thought of leaving that. I had finished the doctorate and I was moving ahead in that career. But I had several communications from USIA. And then, as it happens, Murrow himself came down to Durham, North Carolina, which is where I was teaching at the time, and stopped in Durham to visit with me and to talk about the possibilities that the Foreign Service offered.

My wife always says that that one thing in itself sold her on the Service, and there was no way I was going to stay there, having had a visit from Edward R. Murrow.

But indeed I did decide to go on leave and to come into USIA. As I said at the time, I'd go in for a year. And, of course, that year stretched into two, and, fairly soon, after three or four years, it was clear that I was not going back into teaching.

Q: What was your impression of the students? I assume that you must have been doing a certain amount of interviewing or examining foreign students before and after. Were there any sort of conclusions that came, about the impact of American mass media on the students before and after, that you carried with you to say, boy, I want to do something about this, or this is something to use?

DAWSON: Well, let me just say, first of all, that it's clear that they derived many of their attitudes from exposure to American media, especially to newspapers and magazines and, to a great extent, to film. And they had an extremely exaggerated notion of what the United States was all about, and, after having been here for a while, it became much more realistic and much more proportionate, you might say.

Your question that you just raised is one no one has ever posed before to me. I've talked about this many, many times, but you're the first to put it in the way that you did. Yes, I knew it was possible for the media to influence attitudes. And it seemed to me, as I thought about USIA and the Foreign Service, that it would be a good idea if at the very outset one could provide foreigners with a more realistic picture, a truer picture, a more meaningful picture, so that their notions about what this country's like would be more realistic from the start. And, yes, I did take that with me into Foreign Service work, and it may well have motivated my interest in it.

Q: Could you describe what you did when you first came into the USIA.

DAWSON: Yes, I was assigned to Uganda as cultural affairs officer. I was the first number two at that post. As you know, USIA has a number of one-person posts. And so I was the cultural affairs officer, put there largely because Uganda was becoming increasingly important in East Africa and important to us, and because they had Makerere University College there. And, with my academic background, our betters at USIA felt that it would be a good match to have an academician there in Kampala where the university was, and hopefully we could make some inroads with the faculty and students at that university.

As a cultural officer, I did a number of things there. First of all, I worked hard at making sure that our library was one that university students would feel interested in coming to and using. In short, I devoted my attention to improving our stock of books and magazines and so on. That was very important.

Secondly, I started holding a number of symposia, even conferences, in our facilities there, to attract not just the students but adults in Uganda as well. I encouraged the sending of more and more American speakers out there. I was actually looking toward a time when we could promote American studies on the campus of Makerere. There was no such thing at the time. Indeed, the US was looked upon with great suspicion in these days of the immediate post-colonial period.

Q: Independence came when?

DAWSON: It came in '62.

Q: Sixty-two, and so you arrived...

DAWSON: Got there just after independence.

And I gave careful attention to selection of Ugandans to go to the United States. I concentrated on the younger, up-and-coming ones instead of the old ones who had been settled there already for a long time, and concentrated also on Americans to be brought there and to whom Ugandans would be exposed. That was a large part of our effort.

I founded two publications out there. One was designed for consumption within the country. It was all about the United States; I think we called it Press Time USA. And this gave little capsules of information about this country, a good deal about African students in the United States and what they were doing, what the US was doing in terms of its AID program for Africa, and indeed concentrating on any accomplishments of any Ugandan student in the United States. That was one publication.The other one was Uganda

Calling. And that one was designed for the increasing number of Ugandan students who were coming to the United States for education, and did two things there: it gave them information about home, a lot of it involving what the US was doing in that country for Uganda, and then provided them with information about each other in the United States. A student in Maine did not know that a Ugandan out in California was on the honor roll and probably had won a fellowship. Well, we carried that type of information in Uganda Calling. So it was very, very exciting days.

Q: Today, when one thinks of Uganda, one can't help but think of Idi Amin. But what was it like at this period when you were in Uganda?

DAWSON: A wonderful assignment. We're talking now, as you said, about immediate post-independence for the country. Uganda was a place where everything worked. I make that point because, later on, when I went to West Africa...

Q: One heard of Uganda as being sort of a paradise.

DAWSON: It was a paradise.

Q: It was considered really much better in many ways than Kenya.

DAWSON: Oh, yes, by all means.

Q: Beautiful country.

DAWSON: It was sort of the smallest, most beautiful place you ever saw in your life. It had two or three fairly large cities—Kampala and Entebbe and Masaka and others around. Good infrastructure. As I said, everything seemed to work. The people were —were and are, I guess—very reserved and not especially outgoing, but once you got to know them, they were cooperative and interested and eager. The university was an extremely good one. They had the undergraduate school there for East Africa. Sort of, I would say, the liberal arts portion of the university was there, plus the medical college,

which was attached to Mulago Hospital, a teaching hospital among other things. Uganda had excellent transportation facilities. The railroad started there and went all the way down through Kenya and Tanzania to Mombasa. And it was a part of the East African Federation, which means they used common services: postage, transport, currency. It was an orderly place and, as I said, by all means the most beautiful country you'd ever want to see.

Q: In a way, you must have been up against the same thing that happened to some of our cultural officers when they went to the Ivory Coast. The British in Uganda must have had first claim, they must have been well entrenched. How did you work? I mean, you both spoke the same language and were allies, but at the same time I'm sure you wanted to get the brightest Ugandan students to go to one of our establishment universities as opposed to going to Oxford University.

DAWSON: It was a major problem, actually. And when I said earlier that I was chosen for that post because of my academic background, that's true, and that was the problem that we were dealing with.

One of the big issues at the outset, for example, was that we had begun what is known as a Teachers for East Africa program. The Peace Corps had not been accepted in Uganda yet. But they had agreed (and when I say “they,” I mean the Ministry of Education, which had at all of its checkpoints and gatekeeper points British civil servants), they had finally agreed to accept teachers in their secondary schools from the United States. But they required them to study for maybe three months at Makerere, with the assumption being that these teachers were just not prepared to go into these wonderful schools of Uganda without some further brushing-up, on location as it were.

And the British did not want Ugandans to go to the United States, certainly not the best and brightest. They put every obstacle in our way.

The teachers for East Africa, for example, if they were American and had master's degrees, they were paid at the bachelor's level. Whereas the British teacher, especially if he came from Oxford or Cambridge and had a master's degree (which, as we both know, is not something you work for, it's something they give you), was paid at a higher level. And so we had to fight these types of things.

They tried to prevent us from recruiting the bright students who finished at the higher school level and were therefore prepared for university in Uganda or Britain. They tried to prevent us from recruiting those, and left us with those who had merely gone through four years of secondary school, the so-called high school graduates who were not qualified to go to university under their system.

So those were the specific problems I faced when I got there, and they were the ones that USIA sent me to deal with.

Q: Did you go head-to-head with the British consul, or did you just bypass them and go straight to the Ugandan government and make your pitch?

DAWSON: I did exactly the second thing: I bypassed the British consul. I went to the Ministry of Education. I became very friendly with a number of the Ugandan officials in the ministry, and even some of the British in time. And it didn't turn out to be a nasty fight or anything like that. I made it very plain that we were interested in helping. And, because of the approach I used, I did not, I think, pose a direct threat to them. I let it be known that we wanted to work with them cooperatively, but indeed we had some places where some of these students could study, and that it might be to their advantage for us to encourage them to go there. We had money to send them. And in time the obstacles that they had been putting in our way tended to vanish.

The Makerere University itself, I began going out there, and in very short order I had become a member of one of the halls. This was the first time this had been done for an

American. I became a member of the high table at New Hall. And so the students began to see this. See, they had negative attitudes toward American education as well, so they began to see this and the impact I was making. They began to understand me and to attend the meetings and such things that I was arranging, and so they, too, came around in time.

It was a very exciting nearly three years that I spent there, most of the time working on the kinds of problems you're talking about.

Q: Well, then, how did this transfer? Because I have here you spent another three years in Lagos, Nigeria, from '64 to '67. Was the situation different there?

DAWSON: Oh, yes, yes.

Q: Or if there's something more to talk about in Uganda...

DAWSON: Oh, no, not really. Not really. I must say, though, that...see, I had come into USIA laterally and was sent to Kampala, a very small situation. As I said, I was the first number two. But on this thread of these things we've been talking about, because I was able to do these things there, they selected me to go to the largest program, you see. And so I went over to Lagos to be interviewed by the public affairs officer who was in charge then, a very senior man, who said, “Okay, by all means you must come.”

And I went to Lagos, after nearly three years in Kampala, as the cultural affairs officer in Lagos. And there, of course, I had a staff. There were about three or four assistants on the staff in Lagos for cultural affairs alone, and it meant that I now headed a program, whereas in Kampala I just had to generate one.

Now Lagos was quite different. Although the system was British-oriented, Americans had made inroads out there over a long period of time. Indeed, in the eastern part of the country, they had a university there, the first in Africa, modeled on the land-grant college

in this country. And they became the first university in Africa, certainly in Nigeria and I suspect in Africa, to award their own degrees. See, prior to this time, degrees were studied for in Africa, but the examinations were sent to Britain.

Q: Oh, yes, they had that same system in India; it was part of the empire.

DAWSON: The colonies, yes. And then the degree was awarded by the University of London. So a graduate at Makerere, if you asked him had he finished university, would say, “Well, I'm a graduate of the University of London.” What it meant was that his degree was conferred by that university, because Makerere was in, I would say, sort of a father-son relationship to the University of London.

Anyway, the University of Nigeria was founded basically by American-educated Ibos, when you come right down to it, who had recognized the value of the kind of flexible education system we have and wanted that for Nigeria. And so, at the time when I was there, it was being, in a sense, nurtured by Michigan State University. And it was existing side by side, of course, with traditional British-type universities—Ibadan, Ife—but it was something new on the continent. Soon after the University of Nigeria began issuing its own degrees, the other universities started doing it as well, and they cut off this relationship with the University of London.

The University of Lagos was being built when I got to Nigeria. And this was one of my primary responsibilities. And, indeed, as I stayed there for a year, I saw the civil war was beginning, was gathering steam. It had not broken out by the time I left, but it definitely was on the way. And one of the manifestations of this was the fact that all of the Ibo faculty at the University of Lagos were leaving Lagos unceremoniously. They just couldn't stay there. The faculty, of course, was mainly foreign and Yoruba at the time. And I was invited to go there, with two or three other outsiders, so to speak, and to help them form the first school of mass communications, probably, in Africa. Certainly this was the first in Nigeria, and was formed right there at Lagos. So I'm, in a sense, one of the founding

faculty members of the Department of Mass Communications (I think it's a School now) at the University of Lagos.

Q: Well, now, I've never been there, but it would strike me that in a country like Nigeria it would be very difficult to reach out, say, to the Muslim side, the Hausa. I mean, was it difficult to get to, particularly the Muslim groups, but to the different groups? Because it's a very disparate country, isn't it?

DAWSON: No, well, no. Well, first of all, in Lagos, you have a variety of peoples, backgrounds, and types. It's a very cosmopolitan city in that sense. And so the Muslims there were simply another population. Not all of them were Hausas, northern people. Many of the Muslims belonged to the dominant tribe in the area, the Yoruba tribe right there in the area, number one. And so it was not difficult at all to reach them. The problem was that, even though they were large in numbers, their education lagged behind the education of both the Yoruba and the Ibos. And so one didn't come into contact with them as often as one did with these other groups.

Secondly, the US government has consulates, as you know, in other parts of Nigeria. At the time I was there, there were three, I believe, in the north. There was one at Kaduna, one at Kano, and one at Zaria. And with that kind of establishment there, the consulates, with USIS attached, had direct access to Muslims, because they were the majority group in these areas.

Q: Were there any major problems in dealing with the Nigerian government, or were they basically receptive at the federal, state, and local levels?

DAWSON: Basically receptive. Very, very Western-oriented, to the extent that you dealt with Ibos who were in government. And many of them were in government, they were the civil servants. They were extremely pro-American, or certainly American oriented. Many of them had been educated in this country.

See, the education of Nigerians in this country went back to Nnamdi Azikiwe, and that's not very far really, about the late '20s, early '30s. And he espoused the idea of American education, especially among his own people. And, of course, the notion spread, and there was not much of a problem; Nigerians were eager to come to the United States. In fact, even when I was there, as far back as the mid-'60s, you had a problem there similar to the problem that you had in places such as Manila and, I guess, Mexico City and Jamaica, where people are just lined up trying to get visas to come to the United States.

So there was no problem really, except that in some of the ministries you still had the British civil servants who were resisting these kinds of inroads. They felt threatened by the American influence and wanted to keep things as British as possible.

The thing I did that was most memorable and certainly most satisfying to me in Nigeria was to start what came to be known as the John F. Kennedy Memorial Essay Contest. I started that in, I guess, my second year there. It was a nationwide program, with all of the best schools competing, and it was extremely successful. It went on right through the civil war, long after I left, and they invited me out there for the tenth anniversary observance of it.

Q: The civil war ran from when to when?

DAWSON: From July of '67 to January of '70.

Q: Apparently we must have been completely cut off from Biafra, weren't we?

DAWSON: Well, see, I left before that break occurred. It was rumored and we knew that there would be a Biafra, but I guess the war really hadn't started before I left. The Ibos were headed back east; they all had been given time to get back into what became their tribal enclave, the eastern area of Nigeria, before Odumegwu Ojukwu declared a Biafran state.

Q: Then you went to Liberia as public affairs officer, where you served for another three years. With its American orientation, that appears to be the major problem, from what I gather, of Liberia. I mean, you had this sort of ruling class at that time, who had close ties to America, and then sort of the hinterland, which was sort of cut off. I mean, was this a problem or not?

DAWSON: Well, it is less stated. Something roughly like that is the history of Liberia.

It's one of the largest American presences abroad, where the embassy is concerned, and there was a fairly sizable USIS operation there. In addition to the operation itself, we had the Voice of America relay station out there, the largest in the world. And then we had, at the time that I went there, something called the African Press Center. Ed Murrow had thought that instead of bringing all the African... throughout the continent to the United States, to teach them broadcasting techniques and that sort of thing, it might be better and you could save funds and do more of this type of training to take them to this spot in Africa on the continent. And so this operation was established in Liberia. So we had what we called the APC there. But there were all kinds of American facilities in Liberia, and it was a very big and very interesting program.

Insofar as the Americo-Liberian problem is concerned, certainly the most educated people, the ones who were most in charge, had a background that they could trace to somebody in the United States. The history of it, as you know, is that ex-slaves from this country, or the descendants of ex-slaves, founded Liberia and modeled their government and political structure, currency and so on, on that of the United States. It's the only country in Africa where that was, and is, true.

You asked if it was a problem. I guess, in the sense that the British resistance was a problem in British Africa. In the sense that you were trying to influence opinions in the direction of some of our more desirable traits in this country. We were trying to talk about the American foreign policy in terms that were understandable and for which you could

probably gain support. In that sense, Liberia was not a problem, nor were these folks that you were mentioning, because we were, in a sense, preaching to the choir.

Our big challenge there (and the US has always accepted this as a challenge) was to encourage the ruling classes of people to be more open and to spread their influence and the goods of society, if you will, more generously among people that they referred to as tribal people, so that the society could become increasingly democratic and increasingly stable.

Q: What were your main concerns while you were there in Liberia?

DAWSON: My main concern was pressing the notion of democratic institutions, a greater awareness of democratic institutions and their workings, among the ruling elements of Liberian society. As I said, we had a more pressing responsibility there than elsewhere to try to encourage what in those days we called national development in certain directions. And the direction we were concerned about in Liberia was toward a greater democratization. Liberians looked to the United States for assistance. In fact, they relied very heavily on the United States. And what we were talking about for the most part was better use of these resources, more liberal use of these resources, and the advantage of an increasingly democratic society.

Q: What was the climate when you were doing it? I mean, was it a problem?

DAWSON: No, very friendly. This was one country where you didn't need to worry about anything. One could do almost anything one wanted to do in USIA. (It was USIS.) It was a center of cultural activity. I had forums there, I had symposiums, we had films. I remember we ran an election-night vigil for the Humphrey-Nixon election.

Q: In '68.

DAWSON: Yes, and the people crowded the streets. There were so many people there we had to call out the police department and the fire engines to get them out of the way. It was a dangerous situation.

Q: Well, you had three solid tours in Africa, then you came back to Washington, to USIA. You were there from '71 to '73 on this particular job as cultural affairs advisor.

DAWSON: Well, no, the first year I was back in the United States I was in this thirteenth Senior Seminar on foreign policy. Then I went back to USIA and took over the job of cultural advisor, and I guess I must have stayed there a year and a half, maybe two years. And it was while I was there that I became deputy director for Africa.

Q: First, what was the cultural advisor, was this for Africa?

DAWSON: No, worldwide.

Q: What were your responsibilities there?

DAWSON: Well, the responsibilities there were to try to develop themes that our posts throughout the world could promote. We would study the various programs that USIA was already conducting in various parts of the world, but, more importantly, take a hard look at this society itself, being here and on the scene, to see what were the trends in this society and keep our posts abreast of the currents running through this country at the time; to identify and locate the kinds of materials that they could use in their programs abroad to promote such things as better and more liberal educational policies. For example, as I said, an emphasis on democratic institutions or things of this nature.

So the cultural advisor's job was to keep abreast of trends in this country and to identify materials and speakers and ideas that could be supplied to our offices abroad to help them keep their programs up to date.

Q: Well, I can think of two major themes—there may have been another one that escapes me—that were going on in the United States during the early '70s. One was obviously the protests within the United States against Vietnam. And the other was race relations.

DAWSON: Right.

Q: And these are two rather explosive issues. How were you and USIA dealing with these in order to pump this information out to the field? I mean, a very difficult time, I would think.

DAWSON: We were trying to make the point, on race, that the government of the United States was making a very earnest and serious effort to deal with the problem. And mainly and basically that it was not hiding anything, but dealing with it head-on and within the parameters of our legal tradition, with the thrust of the federal government itself at all times (and often the thrust of state governments) in favor of a more just society. And so the products that you see coming out of USIA in this period all pointed in these directions.

Our policy, especially for Voice of America and the so-called fast media operations, was to tell the whole truth about the situation. Not to try to gloss over the protests that were taking place, but to try to paint them as a natural part of the evolution of this society in a more wholesome and just direction.

Q: Did you have any problems on this from directions from the White House? I mean, this was the Nixon White House, which had a pretty heavy hand in a lot of things.

DAWSON: No, no, I must say that we never had a problem of that nature. Now it could very well be that Voice of America might have been encouraged to tone-down some of its reporting. I don't know that; I would suspect not.

Q: But you weren't feeling it yourself.

DAWSON: Oh, no. No, no, no, no. No. To the contrary, I was encouraged to travel around and to try to make these points. And I did do quite a bit of traveling in this period.

Vietnam was a bit different. As you know, it was very wrenching for everybody concerned. Although no one tried to encourage you to paint a rosier picture than there was on the situation, I think the main point there was: Let's not talk about it, let's try to avoid this issue as much as we can, we have other things that we can talk about. But, again, even there, to the extent that we were able to talk about it at all (and we were), the feeling was one should be up-front and truthful about the situation. The protests, as you say, were extremely severe, and they were taking place all over the country, as you know, and especially right here in Washington and in New York.

Q: Then, from '73 to '77, you were in charge of African Affairs for USIA.

DAWSON: Yes, I was, first, deputy area director, and then area director for Africa for that period, which was a very, very exciting time for me. I had to go to practically all of the countries in Africa, to visit and evaluate our personnel, evaluate our programs.

Q: Any particular problems? Any countries where you found things weaker, as far as what we were doing, than other countries?

DAWSON: Oh, yes. We had a number of problems in South Africa, for example, which is a place that I found myself going to quite often. There was an effort to put a clamp on the kinds of things we were doing there. We were trying to preach democratization, and the South African government wasn't interested in that.

One of our big projects was to open a branch of USIS in Soweto, the sort of segregated township outside of Johannesburg. We had fights on that, both in South Africa itself and also back in this country. Many people here felt it was not a bright thing to do, not a right

thing to do, because it was accepting the segregated status. And then, out there, the South Africans were afraid that we'd be giving...[tape ended]

We managed to open a reading room in Soweto, and a YMCA out there, and it worked very well. Many people that I see from time to time now, coming in here from South Africa, made great use of that reading room that we established in Soweto in those days.

But that one situation wasn't the only problem.

Q: But, just to follow that through a little, How did you find it was, dealing with the South African authorities on this thing? When you came by on visits, were they a difficult crew?

DAWSON: Well, basically the negotiations were carried on by our officers on the spot—the public affairs officer, the cultural affairs officer. When I got there, either they had made a decision or had not made a decision to do this or that, and they were not eager to deal with me on those questions. They had already dealt with, and through, the embassy by my arrival. But insofar as I personally was concerned, in dealing with the government officials in South Africa, I had no problem. I think they made a special effort to be nice to me and to see to it that I didn't get a sense of being put upon or being discriminated against or anything of that nature. I could tell I was sort of being treated with especial care.

Q: You mentioned there were other problems around.

DAWSON: Yes, in these years, for example in some of the smaller francophone countries that were also Arabic, the smaller, nomadic tribal conditions were problems that our officers were not encouraged to touch. The Tuareg, for example, the nomads there.

Q: The northern nomads, the famous Blue Riders up in Morocco and Algeria.

DAWSON: And they were down into Niger and so on. And they were mistreated really by the governments. We had an officer out there who became interested in this and wanted

to do a lot of publishing on this subject in local presses and so on. He simply was declared PNG. We had to pull him out. They didn't want you to touch issues like that.

And let's see, in other countries, I guess we had large money problems in a place like Zaire, where the prices escalated. Nigeria—outrageous because of the oil boom, and, too, we had problems of finance there.

In other words, it was a managerial function that I was serving during those days, as well as a policy one. We had to devise policy and see that that was carried out and see how well it was going, and we had to run the show.

Q: Well, a couple of names come up—Idi Amin and Bokassa, and some of these authoritarian governments were coming to the fore in those days. Did we just have to sort of diminish our work during the time these military leaders were in charge?

DAWSON: Well, in those particular instances we certainly chose to do so. We did not want to be visibly doing things, however desirable these things were, under regimes such as that. We clearly had to distance ourselves from a Bokassa and from an Idi Amin by all means; it just wasn't in the works. When I was in Uganda, the prime minister was Obote. He was a very fine person and a colleague of Nyerere's. I'm sure they parted company in later years, but he was a formidable and a very interesting figure. I never really had any dealing with Bokassa, except in terms of supervising my officers who were in that post, you see.

But the main point is that the United States had to distance itself from people such as this because we did not want to be seen as giving aid and comfort to their aspirations in those countries.

Q: Well, how about a leader like Nyerere in Tanzania? I mean, here he was, you know, an extreme socialist and a man of pronounced ideas and all, and really not very friendly to the United States, but it was a different type of rule. How did we deal with him?

DAWSON: He was provided great support by us. And I wouldn't say he wasn't friendly toward the United States. He certainly was, from the very beginning. I guess the Peace Corps in Tanzania (in Tanganyika as it then was) was probably the first in Africa, certainly among the first two or three. So he started out as extremely friendly toward the United States. It's just in later years, as he moved more and more toward a more socialist economy, that he became critical of the United States. He felt the US had let him down, actually. He had wanted to model this society pretty much on the United States, that he felt that he could do, but then he began to feel increasingly disaffected as time went on. I think he felt that the US could not be a model for Tanganyika, and certainly not so as he became more and more socialist.

Q: Were you at a time when we were hauling back our USIA, or were we intensifying our efforts in Tanzania?

DAWSON: In the early days, we had a large presence there, a very extensive program. We had some top officers assigned to Tanganyika, mainly because of the presence of Julius Nyerere and the inroads we thought we could make there and in the whole of East Africa. Again, as I said, it was in later years, as his politics began to change, that we started to draw down on both our AID program and the USIA operation.

Q: You were in the Central Command, or whatever it is, at USIA. Where did Africa fit in? I mean, it was very obvious that during much of this time Henry Kissinger was running things at both the White House and at State, and Africa was beyond his ken, and Latin America also.

DAWSON: Yes, yes, low priority. Yes, very low priority. I think, well, it was clear that Africa had the very lowest priority of all. And it was difficult in those days, because you knew that it was the one area where we could do a number of the things that our organization was designed to do. We could promote policy, we could carry on cultural activities, we could agree on terms, so to speak, with the Africans, but very little money was being put into the

programs there. Kissinger was, as you suggest, much more oriented toward Europe. To some extent, I guess, Asia. But it certainly wasn't Africa.

Q: This is 1991 and the world has changed, but at that time how did you feel, and how was USIA operating, about "the Soviet menace" in Africa? What was the feeling about it at that time?

DAWSON: The best I can say, I guess, is that we were certainly on the alert, because the Soviets were making a big push in Africa at the time. Soon after I arrived in Uganda, for example, they sent a military attach# (who called himself a cultural officer) into Uganda at the time. They had a growing presence there, and we were always sensitive to this. We had these very friendly governments, Liberia for example, and we would not expect them to allow a Soviet mission to open.

That was one of the big issues of the time, by the way, whether or not there would be a Soviet diplomatic presence in the country. I think there was never one in Nigeria as long as I was there. Nigeria, of course, was the big country, it was very influential, and it was our major target. And the Soviets were doing everything they could to challenge our presence on the continent, and especially so in Nigeria.

So we were talking about the Cold War, and we were talking about a very active Soviet presence, whether in residents or coming in the form of visitors—circus acts and so forth. Yes, this was a Cold War period.

Q: And this was of major concern to us?

DAWSON: Very much so.

Q: And this was also the period when things were heating up in Angola, with Cubans, and in the Horn of Africa.

DAWSON: Not to mention that very grave problem that we faced that seemed intractable at the time, the problem of Rhodesia.

Q: Oh, yes. That's right.

DAWSON: Ian Smith.

Q: Yes, and the unilateral declaration of independence, UDI.

DAWSON: UDI, the unilateral declaration of independence.

Q: What about this? You were in USIA headquarters, dealing with Africa. What did we do? Well, we had no representation, did we?

DAWSON: In Salisbury?

Q: In Salisbury.

DAWSON: Once there was the UDI, we withdrew our presence from Salisbury.

Q: Well, I take it, throughout our publications and our activities, we were denouncing the UDI.

DAWSON: Oh, absolutely, yes. We certainly did not favor that. We had a very sensitive problem, of course, because the British were not as strongly committed to a different type of rule, or so it seemed, as we were. So there was a little tension there. We had to worry about South Africa, too, which was seen as a friend of ours in the area, and of course a friend of Rhodesia's. So we were walking on coals in those days.

And it was one of the things that always came up. Wherever I'd travel, I could be on a roll about democracy in the United States, I could even get by with a discussion of race

relations, but then somebody would say, “Ian Smith.” And then you had a problem: “Why don't you Americans do this? Why don't you Americans do that?”

Q: Were there any major problems, from sort of the Washington perspective, in dealing with the francophone countries? I mean, were the French trying to keep us out of their turf more or less? Was it a problem, as you saw it, or not?

DAWSON: Oh, it was a problem; I wouldn't think it was major. We were able to open up our facilities in all of these countries. We were talking about students coming to the United States, or exchange of persons, people going there and so on. I think the major inhibiting factor, and this was probably an advantage to the French, was the fact that the languages were different. And so, whereas we were head-to-head, in a sense, in the Anglophone countries, where we could really compete for the best and the brightest and so on, the French simply didn't have that as a problem.

Q: Well, then, after that, you sort of had a real change of scene, didn't you? After all this, you must have felt it was a whole different world. You went to be public affairs officer in Manila. You were there from '77 to '79. How did that come about?

DAWSON: Well, I'd always wanted to go to another part of the world. And after I had had such an extensive experience in Africa, I thought it might be good to go try another place. I had been area director, as you say, and that was always a stepping stone, in agency terms, to a larger responsibility. The only larger one that we talked about in Africa would probably be Lagos, and I had spent lots of time there already. But this issue did not arise, actually. With the positions on the table, I chose to go to the Philippines. I had served there in the war. In World War II, I had spent about a year in Manila and thought that I'd want to go back.

And indeed it turned out to be a great decision. John Reinhardt was then director of USIA. Ambassador Dave Newsom was going out to be the ambassador, following Ambassador

Sullivan. And there was no problem of getting this agreed to. In fact, they all seemed to be enthusiastic about my going to the Philippines. And so off we went.

Q: What was the situation that you were dealing with from '77 to '79 in the Philippines?

DAWSON: Basically we were in a period of growing nationalism among the Filipinos. Like the Liberians, they had this American orientation. Many of their institutions were modeled on ours. But they were reassessing the situation. They were beginning to have a sense of, I guess you'd call it...we're calling it nowadays Afrocentrism, they were beginning to feel a Filipinocentrism. They wanted to go back to Tagalog as a language. They wanted to go back to their own dress. They wanted to distance themselves, in a sense, from total reliance upon the United States and on American culture. And that was mainly the issue.

It was nothing that upset us, except in terms of it becoming anti-American. That was what we were trying to avoid. We were trying to assert that Filipinos could become more Filipino without having to become anti-American. And I think that was the challenge.

Q: How did you find that worked out while you were there?

DAWSON: I think it worked out very well. The problem with it, of course, was that you had a number of demagogues who were preaching that these two things were simply incompatible. Somebody along the way, I think it might have been MacArthur, certainly somebody along the way, had referred to the Filipinos as “our little brown brothers.”

Q: Oh, God, yes. I think that was Arthur MacArthur, probably.

DAWSON: Yes, yes, “our little brown brothers.” And that just rankled. So, whenever they could, they hit us with that.

Q: “Civilize Them with a Krag,” too, was the song, I think, at the time. Krag being the rifle that our troops used in the Spanish-American War.

DAWSON: That's right. And, to be sure, the Filipinos are very, very pro-American. There was a referendum taken out there, and it was clear that by a clear majority they wanted to become the fifty-first state. They love everything American. They line up early in the morning, trying to get visas to come to the United States. And it was just a situation, I think, that in many ways was unnatural; maybe they had gone too far.

Q: At a certain point you have to call back and reassert your own self.

DAWSON: I think so.

Q: Or it gets dangerous.

DAWSON: And the US certainly was not averse to their sense of nationalism, except, as I said, where it caused some people to challenge the value of the relationship. They wanted to throw the bases out and break off that kind of relationship with us. They wanted to curtail the American presence in the country, didn't want American teachers, you know, the whole bit.

This was a period, also, as you know, that Aquino was in jail.

Q: This was Benigno...

DAWSON: Benigno Aquino, yes. They called him “Ninoy.”

Q: Ninoy was the husband of the present president of...

DAWSON: The Philippines today. Yes, Cory. He was Cory's husband. They were in exile. Well, actually, he was in jail at the time I was there. And Marcos let him out, and he came to the United States, to Harvard, during my stay. And, actually, it was on his return to the Philippines, after we had left, when he was killed.

Q: From the USIA side and the embassy side, how were we dealing with the Marcos regime?

DAWSON: We had a very friendly relationship with the regime, and we had had, I think, from the beginning. But, as I said earlier, it was becoming clearer and clearer that Marcos had stayed on longer than he should have. And, as often happens in such cases, he was becoming more and more repressive. And, as that continued, the US had to distance itself again, to the extent that it could, from his administration, while at the same time relying upon him for all of these programs and projects that we had going on jointly.

As you know, we were what I call heavily exposed there, with bases and with VOA relay stations. There are more Americans there, I would say, per capita than you find anywhere else in the world outside of the United States. And so we had a very difficult problem very much like the one in Nigeria, but magnified because of the size of the country. And Philippine society, now that Marcos was being challenged more and more, was becoming more unruly.

So there were some anxious moments there during my stay. We had to be a little more concerned about security. We had to worry about the growing disenchantment with Marcos, without doing anything, of course, to undermine him further.

Q: Well, as public affairs officer, this was your thing, the image of the United States. Did you find yourself, say, telling our people to cool it as far as getting their pictures taken with Marcos, or inviting Mrs. Marcos or Mr. Marcos to openings? Was there a deliberate sort of withdrawing into our shell?

DAWSON: We had to conscious of that, yes, definitely had to be conscious of that. We did not welcome a full embrace, as it were. We were very, very careful about how we associated ourselves with the activities. (There is Mrs. Marcos's picture there.) And she was much more active than he. By this time, you see, Marcos had sort of withdrawn to

Malaca#ang Palace and you almost never saw him anyway. But she was very active and quite a controversial figure, much more so than her husband was in those days. So, yes, it did require a certain pulling away.

Q: This was just a period of growing unrest. I mean, there were no great shifts at that time. By the time you left there in '79, it was still...

DAWSON: Oh, it was still very much on track. But, again, as I said, Marcos was being challenged more than ever before. It was clear that all was not well and that the country would be subject to more and more disruption as time went on.

Q: You left there in 1979. The Carter administration had come in.

DAWSON: Yes, I went to Botswana as ambassador in October of '79.

Q: How did you get the job of going to Botswana? That's a question I ask every ambassador.

DAWSON: Well, I can't answer. I was lying abed one evening, and I got this call from Nancy Rawls, who was soon to be ambassador herself, and she said that they wanted to send my name to the White House so that I could be ambassador to Botswana, and would I accept if they did so? You know, I don't know until this day whose bright idea it was, or why me.

Q: Could you give sort of a thumbnail sketch of the situation in Botswana when you arrived there in 1979.

DAWSON: Well, Botswana at the time, as it had always been, and as it still is, was very, very stable. It's a small country. It was fairly liberal in its politics. It had, and still has, several political parties. Excellent leadership. The founding president, Seretse Khama, was still alive, but he was ill when I arrived.

In fact, this turned out to be a problem for me, because he was not able to accept my credentials as he had done every ambassador prior to my coming, and I was the first one to present his letters to the vice president. As it turned out, that was very fortuitous, because we became very close friends, and we still are, and we're in touch. In fact, my wife and I only just came back... [tape interruption]

But President Seretse Khama, the founding president, was ill, and the country was in a sort of a drift. In these African countries the office of the president is very important and, even in a moderate situation such as Botswana, so much depends upon the leader.

Q: I don't know the makeup of the people of Botswana. Were there tribal rivalries?

DAWSON: Well, not really. Khama belonged to the dominant tribe. That's one of the unfortunate things about Botswana to Tswanas. He was a very popular figure. He belonged to a royal family of this dominant tribe, and he was the founding president of the country. It just turned out that he was the only person in sight.

Now the tribal thing did become a problem when he died. And he died during my presence there. And, in order to do some tribal balancing, they had put Quett Masire in as vice president under Khama, which meant that, according to the constitution, an individual from a minority tribe succeeded the president. And indeed he remains president today.

That gives you some idea of the kind of democratic setup and sense of organization that Botswana has. That's one thing that accounts for their stability as a country.

Q: Well, what were American interests? When you went out there, what were you told, or analyzed, were American interests in Botswana?

DAWSON: Well, Botswana, as you know, touches South Africa. It's one of the borders of South Africa, and that was important. It was a kind of alternative, really a light, if you will,

of democracy in that whole darkness that is South Africa. So we wanted to encourage the notion of Botswana as a democratic and free society there.

We had a couple of facilities in Botswana, and in time we came to have more.

Botswana is a rich country: it has diamonds and it has cattle. And there was a great interest on the part of the Botswana in encouraging trade relationships and American business to come there. That was one of the things that Botswana always has wanted, to have more and more American investment and business in that country.

So these were the kinds of things that I was trying to stress during my stay there. Mainly, though, the idea of Botswana as a democratic society, a model for the other countries in Africa.

Q: Were you able to operate relatively freely there?

DAWSON: Absolutely. Absolutely free hand.

Q: This was the time, '79 to '82, when the Reagan administration was just beginning to get its feet going and all, and they had a different policy, less confrontational to South Africa, but in the long run it proved...

DAWSON: “Constructive engagement.”

Q: Constructive engagement. What was your feeling about this?

DAWSON: Well, I quite frankly think we were promoting a policy that was too conciliatory toward a regime that was obviously brutal and had no intention of changing.

It caused great difficulty in my dealing with the government of Botswana, because clearly the Botswana felt, if anything, more strongly about this than I did. They realized they had to cooperate with South Africa because it had to do with their lifeblood. I mean, it really

was critical to them. But they didn't feel that we were doing enough to help them to be relieved of their dependency upon South Africa or to bring about changes there that they saw as necessary.

I thought we put a great deal too much stress on South Africa itself, and too little on building up and recognizing the feelings and the aspirations of the surrounding countries, which by this time were called the frontline states.

Q: Did the problems with Angola or Namibia spill over into your bailiwick?

DAWSON: Oh, absolutely. Most of my representation there, I think, had to do with Namibia. We were trying to get South Africa to get out of there and to free Namibia.

In fact, that was much of what Chester Crocker, the assistant secretary of state for Africa, was doing throughout his tenure, dealing with that one problem of Namibia. In the end, it didn't happen on his watch, but I think much of what he did was reflected in the settlement that finally resulted in independence for Namibia.

But it was a very wrenching time for all concerned, because it seemed throughout the time, and I think rightly so, that we were yielding too much to the feelings and the needs and requirements of South Africa.

Q: Did you or your embassy have any particular problems while you were in Botswana?

DAWSON: Well, the South Africans came over several times and made incursions into Botswana while we were there. And this, of course, was always something that we had to be aware of.

There was an American who flew over, obviously taking weapons into South Africa. His plane went down in the wilderness of Botswana, and that was obviously a problem for us.

Crocker was visiting—not frequently, but now and again—talking about South Africa in terms that the Botswana just did not want to hear. And so, in a sense, that was a problem.

But Americans operated quite freely in Botswana. I had excellent relations with the president. The embassy didn't have any operational problem that I can speak of.

One of the big things I did while there was to negotiate for two installations. One was for the building of a Voice of America relay station; we'd already agreed on the rental terms. And also we put in a satellite monitoring center during my stay, and I negotiated for that.

Q: How was your staff in the embassy?

DAWSON: We had a fairly large Peace Corps; we had three hundred people at one point while I was there.

Q: Good God!

DAWSON: AID was a small mission. We didn't have Marines or anything like that during my stay. And the embassy staff itself was fairly small. I would say it was not an outstanding staff. I think that too often the officers who are in upward African assignments—too often now, not always, but too often—have not been as competitive as they might have been in other parts of the world. There's no long line of people saying by all means send me to Africa, you know.

Q: Three hundred Peace Corps to Botswana sounds almost like overkill. I mean, why three hundred there? It's a friendly place. What's in it for us, in a way, to put that many people?

DAWSON: Well, the Botswana needed us. Their educational system lagged behind others. You know, Botswana was not a colony, it was a protectorate of Great Britain, and so it was easier for them to move in friendship toward us at independence. And the president of

Botswana made a huge pitch for having us improve the educational system, especially the lower educational system in Botswana, and we agreed to do so. That's one aspect of it.

The other aspect of it is, they were very hospitable. They knew how to use resources wisely, and they did so. If there was no job for the ninety-ninth Peace Corps volunteer, they wouldn't ask for them to come to the country. They don't just accept people because they're out there. And, furthermore, they helped to pay for all this.

Q: It sounds like a felicitous meeting.

DAWSON: It was indeed.

Q: Well, I take it you left there feeling quite good about our relations with Botswana.

DAWSON: Oh, I did indeed. Our relations were very, very good with Botswana. The leadership appreciated American interest in the country. They were very eager to have American technology. As I said, American business was one of their big aims, and investments were something that they wanted. So I felt we had great relations with Botswana.

Q: You came back and were with the Board of Examiners then for several years.

DAWSON: Maybe a couple of years, yes.

Q: What is your impression of both the recruitment and the examination process?

DAWSON: Well, it had been tried and it was moving along. It was very resistant to change. Many of the people who were over there had a vested interest in it, I always thought, because they had done much to devise the system. And you could make all kinds of suggestions as to how to improve it, and they would nod their heads and smile and say yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, and then, when the cycle began, they stuck with the old way of doing it. Maybe you've had that experience.

Q: Yes, I spent a year with them. I was in sort of the older one, where it was just basically three people sitting down talking to the candidate. But, no, I know what you mean.

DAWSON: Yes, it is resistant to change.

Q: Well, how effective, during your time, did you feel that the recruitment examination process was in getting to minorities? This has always been a bone of contention, and rightly so.

DAWSON: They simply didn't do enough, and that was one of the big issues I was getting to then. I always thought they should have done more to encourage a larger representation of minorities. And they just didn't do it. They, again, gave lip service to it. They asked me to draw up a proposal, which I did, and it went to be considered at this level and that level and so on, and it was still being considered by the time I left.

Q: And is probably still being considered at this point.

DAWSON: They just never got around to it. Somehow they weren't equipped for that. And I never quite understood it. But they just didn't want to do it. They never got around to doing it, let's put it that way. I'm not imputing any evil motives to anyone at all, it's just that it's something that never seemed to have high priority.

Q: Well, then you returned to academia after that, is that right or not?

DAWSON: No, I went back to USIA on special assignment. I was a special assistant to Director Wick, handling the USIA representation on the Olympics in Los Angeles. I then became involved in a program called English Language Teaching by Broadcast. I negotiated the contract with MacMillan in New York to develop materials for that, to be used in the non-English-speaking countries.

After that, I became director of the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity. I stayed there for, I guess, two or three years in that office.

And during that period I did exactly what you're suggesting: I developed a scheme for the recruitment of minorities. I had what we call an orientation program for minority students each spring. They're carrying it on, by the way. I'm very delighted that they are continuing this program. The point was to bring students from all over the country, carefully selected, into Washington for a week of orientation, and get them fired up about Foreign Service so they could prepare for and take the examination and hopefully pass it. A large number of them did so.

Q: And then you came to Howard, is that right?

DAWSON: And then I retired on the 31st of August and came to Howard on the 1st of September.

Q: This interview is taking place at Howard University. Well, it's been a very full, full career. You're fortunate in having begun and ended with the academic one, with the practical experience of the USIA both in the field and at home. What are you teaching now?

DAWSON: Well, I have one class in the year. I teach “The Impact of Mass Communication Media on Society.”

Q: That's back to your doctoral thesis.

DAWSON: Absolutely, absolutely. But mainly I am conducting a public affairs program here. I'm director of the Patricia Roberts Harris Public Affairs Program.

Q: She was also a former ambassador.

DAWSON: That's right. Patricia Roberts Harris was the first black female ambassador in the history of the United States. She was a cabinet secretary in both Health and Human

Services and in HUD. She was the national committee person of the Democratic Party. She had worked at Howard. Illustrious career in public service. And so this program here is in honor of her, and they asked me to direct it, and I'm trying to work at it.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much, I appreciate this.

DAWSON: All right.

End of interview